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The Swindler Swindled

Genesis 29:1-30

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St. Paul wrote to the Church in Thessalonica, “This is the will of God, *your sanctification*” (1 Thessalonians 4:3). What is God’s will for you? What does God want for you? That you be sanctified; that you be made *holy*. Brothers and sisters, Jesus didn’t simply die to cancel the consequences of sin for those who believe. He offered himself in our place as a sacrifice for sins and to satisfy the just requirements of God’s righteousness, but he *also* rose from the grave, and in rising from death to life he conquered death and sin “so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:6). Jesus gives us new life and he expects us to live it, to grow into it, and each day to become more holy.

Jesus has a variety of ways to teach us to walk in holiness. Some of them are more painful than others. Jesus calls us to holiness; sometimes we listen and we obey; other times we stop our ears and continue in our sin. Those are the times when his discipline can be hard. The good news is that we can know that his discipline comes from a loving hand; it’s as much a means of grace as everything else Jesus gives us. And we can know that he will never leave us unprepared. He takes us to the mountaintop to give us a glimpse of the holy; that experience equips us then to make the long, slow, and often painful walk through the dark valley. This is what is going to happen to Jacob. We wondered if God was going to let him get away with swindling his brother and lying

to his father. God is not. In the next several chapters we see Jacob passing through what we might call God’s “Ironic Punishment Department”. God calls Jacob to holiness by allowing him to be swindled and lied to by others. Through it all, God will also teach Jacob what it means to follow him. Last week we saw Jacob on the mountaintop. God came to him in the vision of the “ladder”. God made it clear to Jacob that he was with him and he declared to Jacob the same covenant that he had declared to Abraham and to Isaac. But Jacob responded to God’s grace with more of his usual deal making: “God if you will do all these things you’ve promised, *then* I’ll let you be my God.” Jacob has a kind of faith, but it’s a selfish and childish faith; it’s a “what’s in it for me” faith. But, brothers and sisters, Jacob isn’t unique. A lot of Christians share the same selfish faith of Jacob—a faith more interested in God’s blessings than in doxology and personal holiness. The good news is that God will work in Jacob’s life to mature and grow his faith and that he will do the same in our lives too.

Look at Genesis 29. After setting up the pillar at Bethel, Jacob sets off again on his long journey:

Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. (Genesis 29:1)

The rest of Jacob’s journey from Bethel is blanked. From his encounter with God he sets out with intention for his uncle Laban’s home. The next we see of him he’s at his destination and stops at a well to ask directions from some shepherds. The scene should put us in mind of a very similar setting a generation earlier when Abraham’s servant stopped at a well near Haran while he was on his journey to fetch a wife for Isaac. The parallel is

deliberate. It highlights two things: First, it reminds us that God is at work; and, second, it sets Jacob’s *lack* of faith in stark contrast to the faith of Abraham’s servant. Keep that in mind as the story unfolds.

As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well’s mouth was large, and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well. (Genesis 29:2-3)

As Jacob arrives he finds several shepherds with their flocks waiting at a well. They’re waiting until all the shepherds with rights to the well arrive. Water was scarce. One of the ways people of that time protect their interest in a well was to cover the it with a large stone. The stone not only kept people and animals from falling into the well, but because the stone was heavy, it couldn’t be moved without all the shepherds being there to move it together. It was a way of controlling the well and making sure no one took more water than he had a right to take.¹ To use the well they all had to be there. As Jacob arrives these shepherds are sitting around waiting for the rest to arrive so that the well can be opened.

Jacob said to them, “My brothers, where do you come from?” They said, “We are from Haran.” [Ah! Jacob discovers that he’s arrived at his destination.] **He said to them, “Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?” They said, “We know him.” He said to them, “Is it well**

¹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2000), p. 61; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1916), p. 269.

with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!" He said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them." But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep." (Genesis 29:4-8)

God is just as much at work here with Jacob as he was when Abraham's servant arrived in Haran, maybe even at the same well. Not only has Jacob arrived, not only do these men know Laban, but when he asks about Laban they as much as say, "Ask his daughter how he's doing; here she comes now." Jacob has come at the wrong time; ordinarily no one would have been at the well at that time, but this day the shepherds had gathered early. God is at work and because he's at work, the "wrong" time couldn't be better. Just he had brought Rebekah to the well for Abraham's servant he now brings Rachael to the well for Jacob.

But contrast Abraham's servant with Jacob. Abraham's servant arrived with faith that God would provide and, before doing anything, he prayed and asked God for guidance, for a sign. Jacob, on the other hands, stumbles on the well. He's not even sure he's arrived at Haran. And he engaged with these shepherds and with Rachael entirely on his own initiative. The story is told in such a way that *we* know God is directing these events, but Jacob is oblivious to Providence. But this is what we'd expect. If God was at work even when his people were deliberately trying to undermine his plans, he can certainly be at work despite our not giving him a thought.

Abraham's servant prayed. Jacob, in contrast, shows off with a feat of strength:

While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.

As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month. (Genesis 29:9-14)

This was a large and heavy stone that required multiple men to move. Now, as the other shepherds sit by watching, Jacob moves it for Rachael's benefit. It might be that he was smitten by her beauty, but it's more likely that this was for Laban's benefit. He knew that he needed to ingratiate himself to Laban, and Jacob knew that Rachael would certainly tell her father about his feat of strength. Jacob was looking for a bride, but he was showing up on Laban's doorstep penniless. He needed to show Laban that he could be a good worker; he needed to give Laban a reason to keep him around.

After moving the stone, Jacob and Rachael meet with hugs and kisses and then Jacob and Laban meet with more hugs and kisses. It's easy to

imagine how excited Laban would be to have word of his sister, who left to marry Isaac so many years before. It's entirely possible that this is the first contact the families have had in all that time. But Laban's no doubt excited too at the prospect of the wealth Jacob might bring him. Remember that when Abraham's servant had come to Haran, he had arrived with a caravan of camels loaded with expensive gifts for the bride and her family. Laban is probably wondering where Jacob has hidden his caravan. Of course, *we* know that Jacob has come under very different circumstances.

And again, notice the contrast between Abraham's servant and Jacob. When Abraham's servant met Laban's family he couldn't stop talking about what God had done for him and for his master. The whole time he was in their home, Abraham's servant was an evangelist for the God of Abraham. It wasn't deliberate; he was simply excited about what God had done and wanted to tell them about all of it. Now, here, we're told that Jacob stayed with Laban for a month, but not a word of what God has done for him escapes his lips. Jacob doesn't care and because he doesn't care, he's blind to Providence. Jacob needs to be awakened to the reality of God in his life. And that's what's going to happen.

God's discipline begins to unfold in verse 15:

Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"

To our ears this may sound as though Laban is doing a favour for Jacob. He's not. After hearing Rachael's report of Jacob's strength,

Laban invited him to stay—to *work* for him. And now it’s apparent that Jacob’s been working for free. That wouldn’t be uncommon, but the culture also dictated that as a close and older relative, Laban should have been helping Jacob to get a start in life.² Now, instead, Laban takes advantage of Jacob by turning a family relationship into nothing more than a business agreement. Jacob deserved more than a labourer’s wages. But Laban no doubt knew what Jacob’s mission was and since Laban is only out for his own gain, he asks a leading question, hoping to rope Jacob into a trap. Jacob the schemer is now up against Laban the schemer; Jacob’s about to get a taste of his own medicine. God is at work.

Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. (Genesis 29:16-20)

Jacob walks right into Laban’s trap. The narrator tells us that Laban had two daughters: Rachael, whom we’ve already met, and Leah. The text says that Leah’s eyes were “weak”. This is a tough word to translate. It could also mean “tender” or “delicate” and it’s usually used in a positive sense.³ It may be that there was something

wrong with Leah’s eyes that made her unattractive, but I’m inclined to understand this as saying that Leah had pretty eyes. In contrast, however, Rachael was a complete knockout. There was no comparison between the two when it came to looks. And, of course, it’s Rachael’s looks that have Jacob smitten. Jacob doesn’t seem concerned with what’s on the inside; he’s not prayerful; he’s not asking God for guidance or wisdom to know the right girl; he’s simply smitten with Rachael’s good looks. And as is so often the case, when a man is smitten with a girl, rational faculties simply don’t come into play.

“Uncle Laban, I’ll take Rachael as my wages! I’ll do seven years hard labour in your service if you’ll only let me marry your daughter at the end.” Jacob is penniless. This is his way of paying the bride price for Rachael. But it’s a high price—probably more than twice what was common.⁴ Laban’s truly taking advantage of him, but love makes Jacob blind. On the positive side, in light of his love for Rachael, we’re told that for Jacob those seven years were as only a few days.

As the seven years ended, we’d expect that Laban would be thinking of the upcoming marriage and preparing for it. Instead, we see Jacob confronting his uncle, having to insist on what is rightly now his:

Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. But in the evening he took

his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” (Genesis 29:21-25)

Laban makes right by Jacob—or at least that’s how it seems at first. He gathers friends and family and throws a wedding feast and celebration. But instead of presenting Rachael to Jacob, he presents Leah. This would have been relatively easy to do. The bride was veiled throughout the celebration. There would also have been a good deal of drinking, so Jacob was no doubt not in full control of his faculties. He takes his bride to the marriage bed, but to his surprise finds Leah next to him in the morning. The Hollywood version of the story has an angry Jacob sitting on Laban’s chest with a knife in his hand and a snarl on his face. That’s not too hard to imagine happening. And Jacob angrily demands: “What have you done? Our agreement was for Rachael! Why have you deceived me?” This is where the story reaches its ironic peak. Ironically, Jacob uses the same language that Esau used when he had protested Jacob’s deceit. Jacob the schemer has just been “out-Jacobed” by his uncle. God is at work bringing Jacob’s sins and character flaws to his attention, giving him a taste of his own medicine.

Laban said, “It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for

² D. Daube and R. Yaron, “Jacob’s Reception by Laban”, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956), pp. 61-62.

³ נָךְ, *Halot*.

⁴ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2000), pp. 61-62; G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws* (Oxford: The Clarendon, 1952), vol. 1, pp. 470-471.

“serving me another seven years.”
(Genesis 29:26-27)

There’s truth in what Laban says. In many parts of the Middle East this is still the custom. Marrying off daughters was one way for a man to build up his wealth. At the same time, unmarried daughters were a financial drain. It makes perfect sense that Laban would want to marry off the less-desirably Leah first. But these are all simply excuses that he uses to justify his dishonesty to Jacob. But poor Jacob has no one to back him up; he’s all alone. And so there’s not much he can do. In fact we see just how much Jacob is at a disadvantage. Laban offers to let him marry Rachael after Leah’s wedding celebration is over, but he insists that Jacob work *another* seven years for him after that. Still in love with Rachael and having no other options, Jacob agrees to Laban’s demands.

Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.) So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. (Genesis 29:28-30)

Jacob got what he wanted, but not without having the tables turned on him. And here at the end of the chapter we have the setup for the next lesson that God has planned for Jacob. In the end he’ll spend twenty years in Haran working for Laban and during that time God will turn all of his old schemes against him.

There’s an important lesson here about God’s call to holiness. In the Old Testament he reminds us: “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23). And in the New

Testament, St. Paul tells us: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). Neither passage is talking about Karma or some mechanistic system by which everyone gets his or her comeuppance. The point is that God requires holiness from his people and will give us whatever discipline we need to teach us to give up our sins and to walk in holiness. Jacob spent twenty years slogging through the valley of God’s discipline, having all of his schemes turned back on him, but he was prepared for that valley by his encounter with God at Bethel. In his dream, God called him into covenant with himself. Not only did he pour out his grace on Jacob at Bethel, but in calling Jacob into the covenant of his fathers, he was reminding Jacob of his expectations: Walk before me and be blameless. Jacob doesn’t get it yet, but as he comes out of the other end of the valley of discipline he will.

Brothers and sisters, let Jacob be a reminder to you that God is always at work in our lives. Let us look at our circumstances the way Abraham’s servant did, expecting to see God at work, ready to pray for his guidance, and always telling others of the wonderful things he has done. Let us not be like Jacob, charging into situations mindless of God and trying to bring about our own will using our own methods and schemes. And, friends, as we acknowledge that God is always at work, we’ll be more aware of the times when God chastens us and calls us to greater holiness. When Jacob was tricked by Laban and shouted, “What is this you have done to me?” the irony of the situation was lost on him. It didn’t occur to him that he had done the same thing to both his father, Isaac, and his brother, Esau. When we face

situations like this, let us be ready to stop and reflect; to ask: Is God trying to teach me something through this? Consider that we have greater reason to trust God than Jacob did and greater reason to understand him. Jacob had no Scriptures; he had only the bare covenant promise. God has given us his Word that we might know him and know his ways; he’s given us new life in our Baptism and calls us to live in it; and he’s given us means of grace—his Supper, his Word, the fellowship of our Christian brother and sisters—to strengthen us as we walk through life. The Christian life is full of ups and downs. Scripture tells us that God chastens those whom he loves. God’s discipline is something we should expect. The key is to be living the life of grace he offers; to be availing ourselves of the means of grace he has given. If we’re living in grace from the start, we’ll be prepared to see God at work. And as we live with the knowledge that God is at work in our lives, we’ll be much more ready to receive his correction and to turn and follow him.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, in our collect today we acknowledged that you are the giver of all good things. We also asked you to guide us into those good things. We make that same request again: in your mercy and by your grace, lead us into the good things you have prepared for us; lead us into holiness; teach us to follow you closely; make us fit for heaven. And, Father, we ask, remind us the means of grace you have given: your Sacraments, your Word written, the fellowship of your Church that through them we would come to know you and yours ways better and see you at work in all things, whether joyful or sorrowful, and especially in the times when we face your loving discipline. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Strength, our Saviour, and our Lord. Amen.